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ABSTRACT

Thirteen national leaders were interviewed about their concerns and hopes for adult literacy. Questions focused on research and public policy, literacy awareness, harmful notions and misconceptions in the field, and the role of the new National Institute for Literacy (NIL). Everyone interviewed stressed the need for research and public policy that would establish adult literacy as a high quality enterprise and full-fledged professional field. Their responses touched on such issues as definitional problems, assessment and evaluation, standards of accountability, staff development and teacher training, and funding. They identified these issues in workplace/work force literacy: the need for more information, incentives to place more responsibility for worker skills upgrading on business and industry, more research on the transfer of cognitive learning to performance-specific contexts, longevity, the extent to which workplace programs should be job related, and the paucity of technical assistance. The interviewees were concerned about misconceptions such as: (1) the literacy problem has been solved by the establishment of the NIL; (2) school reform is the answer to the adult illiteracy problem; and (3) voluntary programs can solve the adult illiteracy problem. Nearly everyone called for continued awareness efforts. All hoped that the NIL would become the major leadership voice. (YLB)

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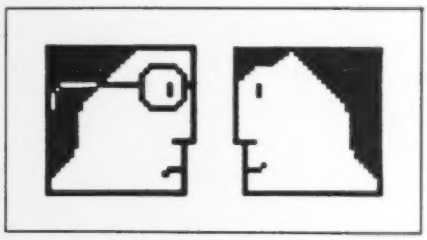
TALKING HEADS:
Issues & Challenges In Adult Literacy



Taking the new National Institute for Literacy as a kind of turning point, BCEL recently interviewed 13 national literacy leaders about their concerns and hopes for adult literacy. Questions focused on research and public policy, literacy awareness, harmful notions and misconceptions in the field, and the role of the new Institute. We found much agreement, occasional disagreement, and many provocative ideas.

Those interviewed were: William Bliss (President, Language & Communication Associates), Forrest Chisman (President, Southport Institute for Policy Analysis), Jinx Crouch (President, Literacy Volunteers of America), Sharon Darling (Director, National Center for Family Literacy), Karl Haigler (President, The Salem Company), Garrett Murphy (Director, Division of Continuing Education, Planning and Development, New York State Education Department), Jorie Philippi (President, Performance Plus Learning Consultants), Tony Sarmiento (Assistant Director, AFL-CIO Education Department), Stephen Steurer (Executive Director, Correctional Education Association), Tom Sticht (President, Applied Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, Inc.), Linda Stoker (President, Center for Essential Workplace Skills), Terilyn Turner (Project Director, Lifelong Literacy), and Peter Waite (Executive Director, Laubach Literacy Action).

Developing Quality Programs & Professionalizing The Field

Everyone interviewed stressed the need for research and public policy that will establish adult literacy as a quality enterprise and a full-fledged professional field. Their responses touched on such issues as definitional problems, assessment and evaluation, standards of accountability, staff development and teacher training, and a range of other topics.

Nearly everyone points to the need for better evaluation of programs and more accountability. Forrest Chisman puts it this way: "Across the board, we need to have a much better idea of what works in all areas of literacy and why it works, and we need better tools of evaluation. There is too much self-evaluation now. We also need to make programs more accountable, and at the same time provide the help they need to meet new standards of accountability. Academic and policy organizations haven't looked at this area at all. Moreover, policy, research, and programs should focus more on not just teaching people but making some real difference in their lives." "Real accountability," Terilyn Turner emphasizes, "is a key ingredient to making the literacy field more professional."

A number of interviewees cautioned that in moving toward systems of evaluation and accountability, we must be sensitive to legitimate differences among programs and program purposes and operating style. "It's just as legitimate to help people meet short-term goals, such as filling out a job application, as it is to enroll them in a long-term program and measure success by whether they got a high school diploma or advanced so many grade levels," says Turner. Jinx Crouch and Peter Waite agree, noting that the issue has special importance to them because voluntary programs serve adults at very low levels and must gear their instructional services to a variety of individual goals.

There is considerable concern about the tools we presently have for measuring program outcomes. "We talk about setting standards against which program outcomes can be measured," says Garrett Murphy, "but we aren't at all clear about the standards on which indicators should be based. We can measure growth in the number of words someone learns, entry into training or employment, improvements in social behavior, or school grade achievements of the children of adult students, but the purposes of programs are very diverse, and proof of program quality may be very different from setting to setting. There is not one single instrument in the U.S. that can validly and reliably discriminate among performance differences or that gives any guidance as to what is needed by way of instruction."

As many see it, varying definitions of literacy are a major obstacle to the development of effective and measurable programs. Linda Stoker thinks that the definition contained in the National Literacy Act – *the ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential* – should be adopted throughout the literacy field. Large segments of the literacy field don't yet grasp all that the new definition embraces, she says. It puts value on the development of higher

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TALKING HEADS

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order thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as on the acquisition of basic reading, writing, and math, and it recognizes that personal, social, and job goals provide the context for instruction. It has implications for the way programs are designed and tells us that programs should be judged by whether adults can better apply the skills they acquire in home, community, and work settings.

Tom Sticht expresses the "professionalization" need as follows: "We have no real system or profession now, just bits and pieces – and people who are overburdened, overworked, underpaid, and underprepared. Furthermore, a huge cast of players, including various agencies of federal government, are working on different aspects of adult education, but nothing is synthesized or coordinated. To make matters worse, we don't have a cadre of trained professionals, an especially serious problem in workforce education, and we need to invest heavily in this area." "Most of what I see when I visit programs is the same as what I saw 15 years ago," adds Sharon Darling. "We haven't advanced as a profession, we're not developing full-time people to work in programs, not allocating resources to what works. We tend to give a little bit to everybody. We need to answer questions about cost benefits and to make recommendations on the national level about how resources should be allocated. If we know this works and that doesn't, then that should affect how the funding is targeted." Furthermore, she says, as things are "we have no infrastructure. What we've got is the top and the bottom, but no middle. We need research and training. The field will have to be professionalized if we are going to produce changes that make any difference."

One of Terilyn Turner's main concerns is the sharp dichotomy between practitioners and researchers. "The former want tools or action-oriented research that can help them now, while the researchers want to do ethnographic studies of people from birth to grave." Turner is sympathetic to both approaches but comes down on the practitioner side at this point. "There are finite resources and people in the field need to know now whether what they're doing makes a difference. We need research that can document outcomes. We also need a more systematic approach to data collection. One of the difficulties with federal programs, for example, is that each year they request different data from programs and their forms requesting the data change. The result is that there's no opportunity for collecting longitudinal data, and programs are sometimes forced to supply bogus information because their records are out of sync with the changing annual requirements."

Tom Sticht and several others call for a whole new policy orientation, one that reflects a different understanding of adult education and literacy. We don't know really what adult education is all about, they say, particularly for those who are non-college bound. Our policies reflect that, and so do the actions of students. Moreover, says Sticht, "we focus too much of the adult basic education effort on second-chance programs designed around K-12 notions, which is totally inappropriate for adults. There is too much emphasis on content that is irrelevant to adult lives, which explains in part why fewer than half of adults who enter programs will complete 50-100 hours of instruction." To make matters worse, say some of the interviewees, the new emphasis on lifelong learning as a national education goal is creating more confusion. We are fuzzy in our understanding of how lifelong learning differs from adult education and literacy, and how our concepts of both connect to our understanding of JTPA training, the Job Corps, family literacy, welfare reform, worker retraining, and economic development. We need to clarify our ideas about the concepts we are using. Literacy is something altogether different from what we've been dealing with in the past. Sharon Darling indicates that what we need is a public policy for human resource development. "Lack of any real policy in this whole area helps explain the quick-fix mentality of so much that is going on today," she observes.

Many of the interviewees point to a need to better translate what we know into practice. Karl Haigler, for instance, suggests that we need a way to make sure that the national literacy assessments being carried out by ETS – which represent a new way of thinking about adult literacy – are factored into state policy development, program design, and development of evaluation tools. This can be achieved in part, he thinks, through public policy.

The nature and level of funding provided for literacy is viewed by nearly everyone as a serious problem. There is deep and growing concern about the precarious financial circumstances of many local and state planning and service groups. "They don't know from one year to the next whether and at what level of operation they'll be able to continue," says Turner, "and as demand for services grows, so does their level of frustration." Furthermore, says Forrest Chisman, "all along there has been too little funding for national leadership organizations like BCEL, the AAACE, and my own organization. We have been fighting an uphill battle to survive, and things are getting worse instead of better." Even though there is more public funding this year than ever before, federal and state money is widely thought to be inadequate and too short-term in nature. Already, some of our most promising programs have had to close down, and many, especially voluntary programs, are teetering close to the edge. But trends in corporate giving are also seen as part of the problem. The few companies that have had major grant programs – such as Gannett and Exxon – have either gotten out of literacy or plan to soon, and most other companies are reducing their support substantially. Moreover, only two or three general foundations provide significant funding for literacy, and the involvement of many more is needed.

Social attitudes about the value of adult education have a great deal to do with our funding priorities, say some of those queried, because our cultural beliefs directly affect our thinking about human resource development and mitigate against large scale funding for adults. To give just one example from Sticht: "It is a widely held belief that by the time children are eight years old, they have attained 80 percent of the intellectual capacity they'll have as an adult. This belief gets translated into policy and funding. So we see $10 billion for compensatory Head Start and Chapter One programs and $230 million for adult literacy and adult education. Many people believe adults can't learn much, even though research indicates otherwise. But we haven't done enough research and, as a result, we can't muster the countering evidence on ABE achievements. If the country doesn't really believe much can be accomplished with adults, it will continue to do what it's doing now, wave a hand in that direction and give a paltry sum." Garrett Murphy suggests another line of research to help with the problem. He would like to see the effect of literacy education for parents on the learning of children systematically demonstrated. "If we could show that investments in boosting the literacy levels of parents have a real pay-off with children, adult education would be more highly valued in its own right than it is now."

Murphy and Bill Bliss both point to another kind of problem. "One of our highest priority needs," says Murphy, "has to do with refugees and immigrants. The Immigration Act of 1990 will let thousands of people with ESL problems into the country each year, and yet there is a total absence of public policy with respect to ESL education and job training. Furthermore, while there are dollars for re-educating and retraining Americans who might be displaced by the immigrants, not one dime has been provided for programs for the new arrivals." There are funds for general ESL services under the SLIAG program, but even so, says Bill Bliss, "we have too few programs to meet even the current demand, and inflexibility in program venues and hours is restricting access to them."

A quite different concern was expressed by Jinx Crouch. "Some policies," she said, "defeat other policies. For instance, some of our tax policies discourage people from staying in instructional programs because they may lose their welfare or other benefits. Too often people can't afford to remain in programs long enough to become really employable – and we need to look at the incentives and disincentives in our laws and sort them out."

Issues In Workplace/Workforce Literacy

Forrest Chisman speaks for everyone about one of the main needs in workplace and workforce literacy. "We don't know enough about what programs are most useful to employers, or about their costs and results. We need much more evaluation of existing experience and more experimentation with new ideas. When you talk to employers and workers about workplace literacy, what they are is very confused. We haven't yet done an adequate job of explaining the need for worker skills upgrading."

From the standpoint of public policy, Garrett Murphy and Tony Sarmiento see a clear need for incentives to place more responsibility for worker skills upgrading on business and industry. "We've got to look more carefully at how public money can be used to change employer behavior," Sarmiento says, "because employers must take more responsibility." Chisman observes that the closest thing we have to a workforce literacy "policy" is the grant program of the U.S. Department of Education. But making small grants for a year or two to education agencies in partnership with companies doesn't seem much of a policy to him. Who should the providers be, he asks, and are partnerships the most useful device or merely convenient? Sarmiento also finds this area ripe for public policy attention. "We need to focus much more on the link between workforce and workplace literacy and developing high performance work organizations," he says. "To do one without the other is to deal with only half the problem."

Garrett Murphy raises another kind of issue. "The JOBS program says the goal is to prepare people to be self-sufficient. But does this mean – considering the limited funding available – that persons on welfare should be given a long period of preparation so that they can enter the workplace in jobs above entry-level, where they will immediately make an

adequate income and indeed be self-sufficient, or does it mean that we should give welfare recipients the shortest amount of preparation that will allow them to function quickly in a job, even in rudimentary fashion, with subsequent on-the-job educational programs offered? No one really knows which of the two approaches – which have the same goal – will work best. Research and demonstration is needed to answer that question. We aren't sure either how best to blend occupational and basic education in a way that moves persons on welfare or in pre-employment status toward self-sufficiency. There has been very little significant attention to this issue."

Jorie Philippi stresses the need for more research and data collection on the transfer of cognitive learning to performance-specific contexts. For example, to what extent, she asks, are the skills learned in one job, such as chart reading, transferable to other jobs and job settings? "Competent people seem to be able to transfer information and skills from one thing to another," she says, "but there is no real research to back that up. This should be a top priority. In the long run, the only thing that will make any difference in people's ability to handle skills-related tasks, is whether we know what they need to learn and how to teach it across the board. We also need to track performance impact and conduct cost benefit analyses in companies offering literacy programs. Otherwise, we won't be able to show that these programs really do have a positive impact in the workplace, especially if offered on site. Employers need to see more clearly that they'll get a return on their investment."

The critical issue to Terilyn Turner is that of longevity. "I can start a workforce program tomorrow but will it be there a year or two from now? BCEL has taken the whole field a quantum leap forward, but employers that are both knowledgeable and committed to making real change are still few and far between. When they ask for help, they usually expect a quick fix and aren't prepared to invest anything."

There were differences of opinion about the extent to which workplace programs should be job-related, but most clearly feel that the research evidence supports this approach. Haigler points to the experience of the military, which conclusively shows job-related instruction to be more effective than generic programs in the workplace. He calls for research to demonstrate this more persuasively to the civilian community. Sarmiento and Bliss both say they have no problem with the idea that people should learn what's important on their jobs, but they argue strongly that this should be a first-step goal, the beginning and not the end. If you make training too narrowly job-related, and that is all you ever offer, they feel, there is a question about how much of the learning can be applied to other jobs and other settings.

Most of the interviewees are concerned about the lack of trained professionals to help companies develop effective job-related literacy programs. Right now the expertise resides mostly in the hands of a few private consultants who are very expensive. Linda Stoker, one of those technical experts, stresses that "successful job-linked programs demand that those developing the program understand the workplace environment and the relationships between skills and work. One way of putting it is that teachers, program designers, and managers need to understand that you don't just teach math, you teach math to improve product quality or productivity. That means that linkages and principles of functional context learning must be understood and programs designed accordingly, which requires solid professional training."

Two main ideas were offered on how to overcome the paucity of technical assistance know-how in workforce and workplace literacy. Those closest to the problem believe the federal government must take the lead in helping the states to develop this capacity. They also suggest that community and public colleges should be the primary source of technical assistance help, with federal and state government helping to prepare them for this role.

Misconceptions & Harmful Notions

Everyone queried cautions that *there are no quick fixes*. "Quick fix" notions are prevalent in all kinds of literacy settings, especially the workplace, but, in fact, it will take time, effort, understanding, and money to bring about significant learning gains whatever the context for instruction.

Many feel that *it would be a serious mistake for people to think the literacy problem has been solved because of the new National Institute for Literacy*, and they think there is some danger of this. The Institute is a potentially important tool, but it cannot by itself resolve the kinds of substantive issues raised above, though it can provide needed leadership. Also needed is a sustained, long-term commitment on the part of the adult education and business communities, and on the part of federal and state policymakers. While significant gains have been made in literacy in the past several years, the movement is judged to be in a very fragile stage, all the more so because of the poor economy.

There is unanimity of agreement about the *danger in thinking that school reform is the answer to the adult illiteracy problem*. School reform is important in its own right, but it will do nothing for the millions of adults who are with us now and in need of skills upgrading. These people are in the workforce now. They are parents and voters now. School reform, which won't happen soon in any case, won't help them at all. The basic message is that this is not an either/or proposition, and adult literacy should not be treated as the poor step-child.

It is a serious misconception that voluntary programs can solve the adult illiteracy problem. Voluntary programs have a vital role in the literacy delivery "system" because they provide last-resort services to adults who do not fit into other programs. But the interviewees concur that expectations are unrealistic about how many and what kind of people voluntary programs can serve. They need a major infusion of funds to better meet their unique role, but they cannot alone, or even in large part, "fix" the adult illiteracy problem in all its dimensions. Forrest Chisman compellingly illustrates the point. He recently discovered in a research project of the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis that voluntary programs have been asked in a number of states to provide literacy services to welfare recipients. "It has been absolutely demoralizing to the voluntary groups," he indicates. "They realized very quickly that welfare mothers require very intensive, sustained, long-term services which they are not equipped to provide. To ask these good people to take on such responsibilities hurts their reputation and their organization."

Steve Steurer argues that *the "keep them locked up" mentality of the correctional system is counterproductive*. Public policy supports locking offenders up, giving them longer sentences, incapacitating them," indicates Steurer. "One out of every 45 adults in the U.S. is presently in the criminal justice system and we simply don't have the resources to keep locking people up. We've got to explore rehabilitative programs." He thinks we need to know whether literacy programs, combined with other services, change inmate thinking patterns and attitudes for the better. "There is some research coming out of the Federal Bureau of Prisons which suggests that literacy education, given along with work experience, leads to a more successful integration into jobs and society."

Sharon Darling is specifically concerned about *misconceptions of the purpose and value of family literacy programs*. Apart from the fact that there is too little evaluation of program effectiveness, she feels that people don't fully understand that the focus of instruction in family literacy programs should be on parents. "Parents in the home environment convey a complex set of messages to their children about the importance of education and literacy. If we persist in the attitude that only teachers can teach, and that proper schooling will by itself impart respect for learning to children, we won't succeed in lifting the educational levels of our poorest youngsters. A major focus of our effort needs to be to overcome feelings of low self-esteem among parents and supporting them to influence the learning of their children. We must pay as much attention to upgrading the education of parents as providing education to children. By increasing the parents' own educational achievement we will change in a fundamental way the messages they convey at home."

Several interviewees worry that *notions of learner participation are exaggerated in workplace contexts*. In a company, they say, it's not just what learners want, it's what that company's mission, goals, and aspirations are. It's a bottom line issue. Workplace programs must have an organizational perspective in addition to what learners need. "You can't apply Paulo Freire's theories of the oppressed in business and industry," says Sticht. "You can't say 'you're oppressing your workers and I'm here to empower them to overthrow your dictatorial management styles.' It won't work."

On Building Awareness

Everyone interviewed feels that progress has been made in building general public awareness, but without exception they feel strongly that the cessation of awareness efforts now would mean certain death for literacy. Memories are short, they say, and, while we have laid some important groundwork and put some tools in place, we still have a lot more rhetoric than attention to substance. Moreover, says Jinx Crouch, "there is no real commitment to changing anything."

Nearly everyone calls for redirecting awareness efforts toward specific issues and target audiences,

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and various ideas were offered about how to do this. For example, according to Garrett Murphy, one focus should be on those institutions that are largely responsible for delivering literacy services – community colleges, school districts, libraries, and vocational centers. "In every one of these settings," he says, "adult education is still an 'also-ran,' and literacy instruction needs to be seen as a true equal to their other functions." Tom Sticht points to building employee awareness as a priority: "Most employees still don't see themselves as in need, and they should be taking more responsibility for helping themselves." Karl Haigler observes that "the problem doesn't look the same everywhere and that we've got to get our awareness messages more micro-focused, down to the community and state levels." Many of the interviewees consider awareness-building among employers to be the top priority. Despite all the demographic data to the contrary, they stress, too many employers don't yet recognize or won't admit that they have a literacy problem."

Leadership & The National Institute

Who should be responsible for meeting the research, policy, information, and awareness needs of the field? State and federal government, legislative bodies, the adult literacy and research communities, the media, students, unions, employers and employees – all need to maintain an active role, say the interviewees. But, where leadership is concerned, some point to public agencies and governors as having the key role, with the federal government lighting the way. Others stress the importance of national organizations, many pointing to BCEL which they feel stands alone as an objective, trusted, and indispensable source of leadership. But all have very high hopes that the National Institute for Literacy will become a major leadership voice.

Ideally, they say, the Institute should become the unifying force for the field ... a pivotal source of public policy analysis and advocacy ... a direct source of technical assistance to the states and to literacy practitioners ... the frontrunner in building the knowledge base through an active program of basic and applied research ... an agent for moving the field to a higher professional level ... a center of basic information and analysis about what works ... a vehicle for better linking research to practice ... a coordinator of various federal literacy programs ... and a bridge between federal programs, Congress, the literacy and business communities, state government, and other key players. All but one of those queried stress that in all of its functions, the Institute, to be effective, should have its own active programs, not farm its functions out to external groups.

Everyone had a wide variety of specific ideas about projects that should be on the Institute's agenda. Here is a small sampling: Sponsor regional policy and program academies. Sort out existing and conflicting public policies and recommend solutions. Bring together the major federal agencies to develop consistency in their policies. Develop a grant program that challenges institutions to develop graduate degree programs in adult literacy – in a way that brings stature to careers in the field. Prioritize a research agenda and develop a three- to five-year plan for achieving specific goals. Fund activities that will link literacy assessment to state policies. Work with foundations and organizations like the NGA to establish regional technical assistance centers that provide professional training and other services. Conduct a program to demonstrate the effective use of technology in literacy programs.

It remains to be seen if the Institute can fulfill its potential as a catalyst and force for change. Many of the respondents think this depends on whether its funding next year and beyond is greatly increased over the $4.8 million available this year. Others fear political interference. Said one person: "Not only should the Institute be outside the control of any single federal department, but it should be outside the control of any single administration. It will have to have real independence, be apolitical, and have a nonpartisan image that remains consistent through changes of administration if it is to be respected and trusted." It will also have to develop its own point of view about the priorities and needs and the strategies to address them. "Everyone is scratching their own issues already," notes Garrett Murphy. "We need the Institute to give us advice and support." ■

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